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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 4817
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3459
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0522
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 3551
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2628
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7325
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5060
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1727
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000127

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/22/2017

TAGS: [MOPS](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKAN ARMY TAKES VAKARAI; TIGERS ATTACK
SUPPLY SHIP OFF JAFFNA

REF: COLOMBO 0113

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

11. (C) Summary: Security forces captured the eastern LTTE redoubt of Vakarai on January 20 after almost three months of fighting. This significant victory in the east may embolden the GSL to continue its campaign to recapture LTTE-held territory in the north and east. On January 21, a cluster of LTTE "Sea Tiger" boats, including (according to government sources) at least two suicide vessels, attacked a commercial vessel carrying food and supplies to Jaffna at Point Pedro harbor. The LTTE is likely to attempt a counterpunch through a terrorist attack or an attack on economic or other targets in the south to show it remains a force to be reckoned with. End summary.

Eastern Coastal Stronghold

12. (C) On January 19 the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) announced its forces had taken control of the eastern LTTE stronghold of Vakarai and consolidated other positions in Batticaloa district following several weeks of intensive combat. The government reported that skirmishes were continuing with LTTE cadres who fled inland, both to the north and south of Vakarai. The LTTE apparently was forced to abandon many vehicles and some of its heavy equipment, especially artillery.

13. (C) DCM spoke with ICRC head of delegation Toon Vandebove on January 22. Vandebove confirmed that most, if not all, of the 10,000 remaining civilians had left Vakarai during the lull in fighting after government forces took control on January 19. The ICRC will care for approximately 25% of these internally displaced persons (IDPs), who are in four camps in Batticaloa. Vandebove did not feel that an assessment mission would be necessary at this time since very few civilians remained in Vakarai.

14. (C) According to Sri Lankan military sources, an estimated 400 LTTE cadres lost their lives in the Vakarai campaign,

while the government side only lost a couple of dozen soldiers. Army spokesman Brigadier Samarasinghe told Pol FSN on January 22 that on January 21, security forces had engaged 75 LTTE cadres who were attempting to flee Vakarai, killing approximately 20. He added that the security forces had captured LTTE camps along the A-15 highway linking Batticaloa and Trincomalee and would resettle IDPs in those areas. The government announced that it had "cleared" the A-15.

Sea Tiger Attack On Supply Ship

15. (C) The GSL claimed that a cluster of LTTE "Sea Tiger" boats, including at least two suicide vessels, attacked a Sri Lankan-flagged commercial vessel chartered by the GSL to carry food and supplies to the Jaffna Peninsula on the afternoon of January 21 at Point Pedro harbor, just two days after Vakarai fell. The Air Force (SLAF) assisted the Navy (SLN) in neutralizing the Sea Tiger boats. An LTTE spokesman countered that the battle was "defensive." The LTTE has refused security guarantees to supply ships to the Jaffna peninsula, demanding the reopening of the A9 highway.

16. (C) Pol FSN spoke to a representative from Asha Shipping Company, owner of the charter ship, on January 22, who stated that the cargo ship had been carrying food for military personnel and civilians. The pro-LTTE Tamilnet website claimed that the ship had been carrying at least 15 SLN sailors. Father Damien, a Catholic priest based in Point Pedro told us: "I was located near the Point Pedro and saw a few LTTE boats coming. Some damage was caused to the cargo ship, and it was burning. The LTTE has told the authorities

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not to bring things for the military. There must have been things on that ship which were not meant for civilians."

17. (C) COMMENT: The aftermath of the Vakarai campaign shows that the LTTE had indeed located its main military assets (artillery) in the middle of a large civilian population concentration near Vakarai hospital. The government's tactics, on the other hand, were clearly intended to hold civilian casualties down. This, plus the unusual length of the rainy season, accounts for the long time it took the government forces to deal with a relatively small LTTE force in a terrain that favored the defenders. The successful push of government security forces on the eastern LTTE stronghold of Vakarai is a significant victory which may embolden the GSL to continue its offensive in the east, or even carry it to the northern stronghold of the LTTE. It is likely that Army Commander Fonseka's New Year's remarks that the forces would "annihilate the enemy" in the north and east represent the government's real agenda, protestations to the contrary notwithstanding. The Ambassador will meet with Army Commander Fonseka tomorrow to urge that the military not undertake a new campaign in the North. The LTTE tactic of attacking shipping supply lines to the Jaffna area is unlikely to win it future support either in its homeland or abroad. It is possible, even likely, that the LTTE will seek to land a strong counterpunch, either in the East, in the Jaffna area, or against economic targets in the South, to show that we can not yet count them out. We will continue to support the GSL's fight against terrorism while urging military restraint and a return the negotiating table.

BLAKE